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Endgame

Thirteen Days
by Robert F. Kennedy, with Introductions by Harold Macmillan and Robert S. McNamara
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It was a time, in Khrushchev's memorable phrase, "when the smell of burning hung in the air." Robert Kennedy's account of those thirteen days in 1962 from October 16, when he and his brother were presented with proof that the Russians were secretly building long-range missile bases in Cuba, until October 28, when the Kremlin agreed to dismantle them—shows the view from the inside by one of the key participants. Written with economy and directness, *Thirteen Days* is a valuable historical document with all the elements of a thriller.

This short, terse memoir—bloated by the publisher with superfluous introductions, photographs, and documents—does not, of course, tell the whole story of the missile crisis. There is a good deal about the events leading up to the crisis that is gone over too lightly or deliberately clouded over. The clash of personalities and ambivalent motives is muted and the tone rather detached. But behind the measured prose we see the spectacle of rational minds swayed by passions and the euphoria of power, governmental machinery breaking down into the struggle of individual wills, and decisions affecting the future of humanity made by a handful of men—the best of whom were not always sure they were right. A disturbing description of decision-making in the nuclear age, this posthumous work also offers a revealing glimpse of an enigmatic man who might have bridged the gap between the old politics and the new.

We have come to take the balance of terror so much for granted that it is hard to imagine any situation in which the two super-powers would actually use their terrible weapons. Yet more than once during those thirteen days it seemed as though the unthinkable might actually occur. SAC bombers were dispersed to airfields throughout the country and roamed the skies with their nuclear cargoes. At one point President Kennedy, fearful that some trigger-happy colonel might set off the spark, ordered all atomic missiles defused so that the order to fire would have to come directly from the White House.

The first showdown came on the morning of October 24, as Soviet ships approached the 500-mile quarantine line drawn around Cuba. "I felt," Robert Kennedy wrote of those terrible moments, "we were on the edge of a precipice with no way off.... President Kennedy had initiated the course of events, but he no longer had control over them." Faced with this blockade, the Russian ships turned back, and the first crisis was surmounted. No more missiles could get into Cuba. But what of the ones already there that Russian technicians were installing with feverish haste? President Kennedy was determined that they had to be removed immediately, and on Saturday, October 27, sent his brother to tell Soviet ambassador Dobrynin "that if they did not remove those bases, we would remove them." The Pentagon prepared for an air strike against the bases and an invasion of Cuba. "The expectation," Robert Kennedy wrote of that fateful Saturday, "was a military confrontation by Tuesday."

We know, of course, how it turned out. On Sunday morning the message came through that Khrushchev would withdraw the missiles in return for a US pledge not to invade Cuba. Kennedy had pulled off the greatest coup of his career—the first, and one hopes the last, military victory of the nuclear era. Not a shot was fired, although we came a good deal closer to war than most people realized at the time, or have cared to think about since.

It was a victory not only over the Soviets, but over many of Kennedy's own advisers who favored a more militant course from the start. The drama was played out among a hastily assembled group, which later took on the formal title of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, that met several times a day in the White House. The sessions were frequently stormy, although the lines were loosely drawn at first. Several of the participants, according to Robert Kennedy, shifted their opinion "from one extreme to the other—supporting an air attack at the beginning of the meeting and, by the time we left the White House, supporting no action at all." A few, such as Dean Acheson and Douglas Dillon, were hawks from the start, and argued for what they euphemistically called a "surgical strike" against the air bases. They were eventually joined by John McCone, General Maxwell Taylor, Paul Nitze, and McGeorge Bundy. Favoring a more moderate course, which settled finally on a naval blockade to be "escalated" to an attack on the bases only if absolutely necessary, were the doves, led by Robert Kennedy and Robert McNamara, and including George Ball, Roswell Gilpatric, Llewellyn Thompson, and Robert Lovett.

Dean Rusk, for the most part, avoided taking a stand, or even attending the sessions. The Secretary of State, in Robert Kennedy's caustic words, "had other duties during this period and frequently could not attend our meetings." It would be interesting to know what these duties were. Robert Kennedy does not elaborate, although he does offer the further intriguing aside, that "Secretary Rusk missed President Kennedy's extremely important meeting with Prime Minister Macmillan in Nassau because of a diplomatic dinner he felt he should attend." That was the meeting, one will remember, where President Kennedy agreed to help out Harold Macmillan (author of one of the two Introductions to this volume) on the eve of the British elections by turning over Polaris missiles to Britain after the Skybolt fiasco that had embarrassed the Tories. De Gaulle, predictably, was furious, declared that Britain still valued her trans-Atlantic ties above her European ones, and vetoed her entry into the Common Market. The Nassau accord was a colossal error of judgment that an astute Secretary of State should have been able to prevent—had he not been too busy attending diplomatic dinners.

Some of the hawks were, of course, predictable. It is not surprising that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were eager to use their expensive hardware. "They seemed always ready to assume," Robert Kennedy wrote, "that a war was in our national interest. One of the Joint Chiefs of Staff once said to me he believed in a preventive attack against the Soviet Union." Nor is it surprising that Dean Acheson, among the most recalcitrant of the cold warriors, should have come down on the side of the military. "I felt we were too eager to liquidate this thing," Elie Abel reports him as saying in *The Missile Crisis*. "So long as we had the thumbscrew on Khrushchev, we should have given it another turn every day. We were too eager to make an agreement with the Russians. They had no business there in the first place." Ever since his crucifixion by Congress during the Alger Hiss affair, Acheson has become increasingly reactionary and eager to prove his toughness toward the Communists. His bomb-first-and-

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